VISIT…

Of Gods and Grizzlies:

The Non-Aesthetic of Nature and the new Kinship of Werner Herzog and Caspar David Friedrich

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This thesis is dedicated to Carolyn Longo, whose love and encouragement made the entire opportunity possible. Thanks, mom.

It is also dedicated to Christopher Pavsek, whose teaching and friendship have inspired me. Thanks, Chris.

KB

"I was asleep at home, and Martje appeared before me. She walked over to the edge of a cliff and stood there, tottering. I felt frightened, and dashed toward the edge, where I seized her, saving her as she was about to fall off the cliff and die. Right at that point, Martje awoke in a panic. My hands were around her throat, and I was squeezing—"

Werner Herzog

Of Gods and Grizzlies

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Introduction

Grizzly Man (2005) is filmmaker Werner Herzog's latest contribution to his unique catalogue of documentary films. Herzog experiments with the documentary genre by editing together a film that is comprised chiefly of footage shot by a man unrelated to the Discovery Docs/Lions Gate Films production. Though he steps so far out of aesthetic control of the film, Herzog manages to secure a place for *Grizzly Man* among his most personally expressive accomplishments on screen. In this way, the film also holds a special place in the ongoing reading of Herzog's work as a whole. One formerly popular reading, in which Herzog is compared to German Romanticist painter Caspar David Friedrich, is refreshed by the addition of *Grizzly Man* to the director's catalogue. While previous analyses relied upon aesthetic similarities between the two men's compositions, this film engages the *non*-aesthetic space occupied by wild nature in each man's work and lays the foundation for a deeper kinship—one that speaks directly to the goals of their often dissimilar images.

Grizzly Man follows the life and death of environmental activist Timothy Treadwell, himself an amateur documentary filmmaker. Treadwell's great passion was the protection of the grizzly bears of the Alaskan peninsula. For 13 summers, the last five of which he documented on digital video, Treadwell lived in the grizzlies' habitat of Katmai National Park. In early October of 2002, later than Treadwell would usually stay among them, he and girlfriend Amie Huguenard were killed and eaten by a grizzly bear. One of Treadwell's cameras was recording during the incident. With the lens cap on though, only the sound was captured. Treadwell's other film recordings, which totaled over 100 hours, were edited by Werner Herzog into a documentary feature.

"No, I *vill* direct this movie," Herzog declared when friend and Discovery Channel producer Erik Nelson casually introduced Herzog to the project that he was himself set to develop.[1] Herzog's enthusiasm for the project may have originated from the shared fascination between Treadwell and him with making films among the dangers of wild nature. He stayed relatively well protected for this undertaking, but Herzog carried in with him a reputation of being fearless. Before making *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog tackled the jungles of the Amazon with *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a volcano forecasted to imminently erupt in *La Soufrière* (1977), and the burning oil fields of post-war Kuwait in *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), to name a few adventures.

Herzog and Treadwell differ greatly between their opinions of wild nature, however. Treadwell lived to protect the pristine environment of Katmai from the corruptive powers of civilization and development. Herzog's films however, paint nature as an antagonistic force. "I do not see wild nature as anything that harmonious and in balance," Herzog says towards the conclusion of his *Grizzly Man* narration, "I think the common denominator is rather chaos, hostility and murder." Herzog is wont to make this and other personal feelings known throughout the film too, a privilege he enjoys as the director and the narrator of Treadwell's stock.

Like Herzog's previous films, *Grizzly Man* manages to tell a true story while unapologetically indulging Herzog's subjective readings. As essay films, beyond simply documentaries, Herzog's non-fiction pieces defy the pretenses of a personally-detached director. This was the medium of the "intellectual poem" to young George Lukács—

[1] Herzog, Werner. Interview with Scott Simon, *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, WHYY Philadelphia, 30 July 2005.

outside of the reach of "rhetorical composition" as Michael Renov, in many ways his successor in documentary criticism, interpreted it.[2] In this vein, Herzog assembles documentary images in a way in which he can tell a story of his own choosing, and submits *Grizzly Man* as an essayistic commentary, not a historical account.

While not overtly fictionalizing the documentary footage, as he did with *Lessons of Darkness* and the more recent *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), Herzog manages to manipulate Timothy Treadwell's footage to the extent that issues of his personal interest in film arise and can be the central focus. Though most of the footage was shot by Treadwell and not Herzog, it is at its core Herzog's *ecstatic truth* from which the final film product originated.

I. Herzog's vision: Aesthetics and Ecstatic Truth

In the 1970's, Herzog gained popular attention with films set against German Enlightenment and Romanticist backgrounds. *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Heart of Glass* (1976) and *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) drew criticism accordingly attentive to aesthetic similarities between Herzog's films and the artwork of the German Romanticist painters of the early 19th Century. As he himself recalls it:

> I was in Paris right after a huge exhibition of the work of Caspar David Friedrich. It seemed like every single French journalist I spoke to had seen the exhibition and insisted on seeing my films—especially *Heart of*

[2] Corrigan, Timothy. *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall) 1999, 319-320.

> *Glass* and *Kaspar Hauser*—within the context of this knowledge he suddenly had.[3]

Herzog does not hold back his resentment of the critics' need to mediate his film imagery this way and he denies the influence of Romanticist painters to this day. "I am not a Romantic," he recently argued, while discussing the landscape compositions in *Heart of Glass* and previous criticisms which linked them in particular to work by Friedrich.[4]

What Herzog denies is being beholden to *any* aesthetic whatsoever. Since the beginning of his career, his inspiration has instead been the portrayal of a kind of *truth* that comes from his own perspective and presents itself in spite of stylization from any other source. "A good part of the secret of his filmmaking success lies in his ability to convince the viewer that Herzog's version of truth is in fact truth," writes Gideon Bachmann in his 1977 article "The Man on the Volcano," after observing Herzog in the process of filming *La Soufrière*.[5]

Herzog, in other words, wishes to communicate his unmediated inner-vision, and in so doing appeal to an understanding that is common among all spectators. Nearly 30 years after *La Soufrière*, Herzog described his documentary work this way:

> I'm after something that you find in great poetry. When you read a great poem, you would instantly notice that there is a deep truth in it. You don't have to analyze the poem in academic ways and all this. You know it instantly. It passes on to you and becomes part of your inner existence, and it's the same thing in cinema. In great moments in cinema, you are hit

[3] Cronin, Paul (ed.) *Herzog on Herzog* (New York: Faber & Faber) 2002, 135.
[4] Herzog, Werner. Interview with Norman Hill, *Heart of Glass*, Dir. Werner Herzog, Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, 1976. DVD. Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2001.
[5] Bachmann, Gideon. "The Man on the Volcano: A Portrait of Werner Herzog." *Film Quarterly* 31.1 (1977) 2-10.

> and struck by some sort of enlightenment—by something that illuminates you, and it's a deep form of truth, and I call it an ecstatic truth—the ecstasy of truth. And that's what I am after, and I am after that in documentaries and feature films.[6]

Herzog introduced the term *ecstatic truth* in his odd 1999 manifesto, "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema." [see Appendix A] The document is largely dedicated to describing what he saw as the failure of the Cinema Verité style of documentary filmmaking: avoiding subjectivity and expressing truth by presenting facts. "Fact creates norms, and truth illumination," Herzog contends.[7] Accordingly, it has become equally necessary to Herzog in his documentary filmmaking as with his fiction, that he pursue expression of his personal inner-vision, disregarding or conversely inventing facts as he sees necessary along the way. He defends this method as nonetheless honest and true to the noble intentions of documentary work because its only goal is to fully present an idea of his, avoiding the distraction of facts. Ecstatic truth is in this way the unavoidable inspiration behind Herzog's choices in presentation, surpassing all possible issues of aesthetics.

II. Centerpiece: Ecstatic Truth and the place of *Grizzly Man*

> Scott Simon: So the next time they have a Werner Herzog film festival, there is a place for [*Grizzly Man*]?

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[6] Herzog, Werner. Interview with Dave Davies, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, WHYY, Philadelphia, 28 July 2005.
[7] Herzog, Werner. "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema" from Cronin, Paul (ed.) *Herzog on Herzog* (New York: Faber & Faber) 2002, 301.

> Werner Herzog: It will be a central place, not just *a* place. It will be a centerpiece.[8]

Herzog may have felt particularly close to the ecstasy of truth while producing *Grizzly Man*. He is persistent in his narration with the idea that out of this nature footage comes a story of human inner turmoil. Herzog considers the film as such a success in this way that he places it at the center of his entire catalogue. More than *Aguirre* or *Fitzcarraldo*, this film evokes a human truth that speaks to the condition of each audience member.

By relinquishing control of the camera to Timothy Treadwell, it may at first appear that Herzog is trying to prove that the condition present in men that inspired the characters of Don Aguirre and Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald in his fictional tales was one that could be found among "real" men as well. However, if this film should be treated as centerpiece of his filmmaking, then it is not just Treadwell's life story that is the accomplishment, but Herzog's whole method of presenting it. Treadwell did not make *Grizzly Man*, after all. Herzog edited over 100 hours of footage into a feature length documentary, including only the elements *he* saw as essential to Tim's story. In the end, the character Timothy Treadwell, represented in the essay style, not-so-coincidentally resembles Herzog's previous heroes, and his story those of the surrounding films.

Upon examining the effects of this method more closely, Herzog may in turn appear closer to the German Romanticists than the critics of the 1970's had themselves considered. Elements beyond color, dress and compositional schemes suggest that Herzog and Caspar David Friedrich are similar artists. In the case of *Grizzly Man*, a film with which Herzog had little aesthetic control, but would claim to have created in an

[8] Herzog, *Weekend Edition*.

environment of ecstatic truth, the shared methods and goal of representation of the two artists are exhibited.

Werner Herzog and Caspar David Friedrich, the artists who worked so extensively in representing humans in the vastness of nature, both dedicated their products more particularly to the study of men who enter, search for some manner of empirical ends (truth, harmony, peace, God, etc.) and inevitably find *un*certainty and death. After examining this commonality, perhaps then we can agree on a place for Friedrich's art in future analysis of Herzog's, and "ecstatic truth" in cinema can in turn gain some traditional context.

III. Timothy Treadwell: The man and the metaphor in Herzog's essay

"There are times when my life is on the precipice of death…these bears can bite, they can kill, and if I am weak I go down." These are among the first lines we hear from Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man*. Herzog decided that it was with this message that he wanted to begin his essay. "Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter," he explains to us in his ensuing introduction, "but in doing so he crossed an invisible borderline."[9] This, in the director's vision, is the great truth behind the character of Timothy Treadwell. The film cuts from the opening shot of Timothy kneeling in front of a presumably unmanned camera to one that he recorded from his own perspective, a single finger stretched out towards a sniffing bear, and Herzog's voice-over begins. Through this choice of words and images, what Herzog is arguing in his introduction of the man is that Treadwell's life, and by extension the film *Grizzly Man*, is best defined as

[9] *Grizzly Man*. Dir. Werner Herzog. Discovery Docs, 2005.

an experience at the dangerous border between one's tangible human boundaries and the wild arena of the extra-human world.

As Herzog tells it, the story *Grizzly Man* compiles a thorough explanation of Timothy Treadwell's upbringing, personal relationships and forays into environmental activism. Treadwell's chief role as the representation of the aforementioned mortal tension between man and nature is inescapable throughout, though. The title appears on screen as Timothy Treadwell enters the first shot of the film. Treadwell's name, date of birth and date of death appear beneath him as he then begins speaks to us. All the while, a bear is visible over his shoulder from a plane adjacent to his. Before Herzog has begun any introduction of Timothy Treadwell in his own voice, the character has already been presented to us as the "grizzly man"—an allusion not only to his naturalist pastime, but also his role as a reference point for gruesome, abnormal death. "I can smell death all over my fingers," says Treadwell as he walks out of that opening shot. It is in these kinds of stagings that Herzog can interpret Treadwell as tenuously straddling the line between two worlds, so the image is repeated often throughout the remainder of the film.

Among the shots towards the end of *Grizzly Man* are pieces extracted from Timothy Treadwell's final video. Herzog's narration of these clips focuses closely on the specific conditions of Treadwell's death. By this point, Herzog's commitment to the evident morbidity of Treadwell's on-screen presence has reached the point that he is convinced that Treadwell must too recognize it, and therefore that even he anticipated the inevitable resolution of his own death. Timothy Treadwell speaks often about the mortal danger of his profession often throughout just the selection of clips from the original tape that Herzog deemed appropriate for *Grizzly Man*. Still, Herzog sees fit to include one of

the chronologically latest of these instances—in which Treadwell uses the word "edgy" to describe himself—among the clips at the very end of the picture, perhaps seeing some special prophetic insight in Treadwell's very last monologues.

The last of these monologues is delivered by Treadwell amidst strengthening winds of an oncoming storm, clad in tattered clothes, to a camera lens slowly fogging up from condensation. As per his routine, he speaks in concurrently cheerful and defiant broken sentences, labors through awkward silences and eventually creeps back behind the camera. Yet in this last one, Herzog sees something unlike the other similarly-themed clips. "He seems to hesitate," the director reads it, "in leaving the last frame of his own film." Whereas Herzog interpreted Treadwell's penchant to remain on-camera inappropriately long earlier in the film as stemming from a sense for the spontaneous "inexplicable magic of cinema," [10] here it must come instead from a premonition of the end of his filmmaking (and of his life).

These scenes from the last video are all presented to us among a series of images of a bear—possibly the one that ate Timothy Treadwell and Amie Huguenard—which Park Services called "Bear 141."[11] In his voice-over, Herzog identifies a "strange persistence" in Treadwell's filming of this particular bear. Of course, not having seen most of the footage shot by Treadwell and seeing only a few moments of this one, viewers must take this statement at face value. The final image of Bear 141 does indeed stand out from much of the rest of Treadwell's filming in that it purposefully captures Amie Huguenard within the frame. She makes an earnest attempt at ducking out of the shot, but Treadwell the cameraman shows no concern for her privacy.

[10] *Grizzly Man.*
[11] *Grizzly Man.*

Herzog's task to analyze this shot is cut out for him, given the rarity of the appearance of another human being amongst Treadwell's tapes and a contemporaneous diary entry of Amie's that referred to Treadwell as "hell-bent on destruction." Again citing the palpability of the nearing end to Treadwell, Herzog rhetorically asks: "Did Treadwell wait until his last tape to put her in his film?"[12] Whether or not we have done so ourselves at this point in our own viewing analyses, it is clear that Werner Herzog has accepted a measure of foresight in Treadwell's footage that is indicative of the man's definitive role as a departing star.

IV. The Audio Tape: Herzog ensures the reception of Timothy Treadwell's death

Among the many curious images of Timothy Treadwell' last video is the audio recording of the bear attack that ended with his death and that of girlfriend Amie Huguenard. Herzog refrains from playing the tape during *Grizzly Man*, a choice that he ascribes in interviews to a respect for the privacy of the couple's death. This seems to contradict much the rest of the film's rotation around the causes and effects of that death, but Herzog additionally expresses a sincere hope for *Grizzly Man* to be seen not as a "snuff movie," which could have been the result of including the soundtrack to a real (and gruesome) pair of deaths.[13] This is not to say that the very *presence* of the audio tape among Treadwell's surviving friends and the makers of the documentary did not play a prominent role. In fact, one of the moments most singularly expressive of the message of *Grizzly Man* caught on film by Herzog himself revolves around this tape.

[12] *Grizzly Man*.
[13] Herzog, *Fresh Air*.

Jewell Palovak, Treadwell's ex-girlfriend and "Grizzly People" organization co-founder, inherited the camera which recorded Treadwell and Huguenard's deaths. With it came the audio tape of that incident. Though she never listened to it herself, she allows Herzog to do so on camera during *Grizzly Man*. In the one scene in which he appears on screen, we can see Herzog with his back turned to us, listening through headphones to the tape that is in the camera. We do not see Herzog's face, but Jewell's is visible from directly across, and she stares intently into it. Herzog attempts to make a few descriptions of what he is hearing before he asks Jewell to stop the tape and then advises her to never do as he did and listen to it. As the two join hands and Jewell weeps, Herzog advises further that she should destroy the tape completely and thereby never succumb to the lure of the "white elephant in the living room."[14]

This scene is remarkably expressive of Herzog's efforts to uncover a human, or *ecstatic*, truth from the Timothy Treadwell saga. The women in Treadwell's life are themselves manipulated to better reflect the version of him that Herzog has constructed. In this particular case, Herzog must literally enter himself into the scene and then actively direct one of his documentary subjects to behave in a certain way. "I hear 'Amie, get away, get away, go away!'" Herzog tells Palovak and after reducing Amie Huguenard's presence at the incident through his partial description of the audio tape to being a marker of the attack on Treadwell, he tells Jewell Palovak that she must not become any more personally attached to it herself. [15] Huguenard is heard from the tape less as a victim of the attack than is really appropriate, and Palovak is forbidden to listen to it and thereby appreciate it on any level beyond the abstract. In this way, the audio tape remains as a

[14] *Grizzly Man*.
[15] *Grizzly Man*.

physical reminder of Treadwell's death without providing information to anyone that can distract from Herzog's judgment of Timothy Treadwell the man as the representative of that death. Herzog takes the one tangible marker of Treadwell's death and employs it as another indication of his own version of Treadwell's life.

What is further telling of the importance of this scene to Herzog's work is the probable lack of necessity to much his contribution to it. After he finishes listening to the tape, Palovak looks into his face and says "Now you know why no one's gonna hear it."[16] The implication here is that the two had spoken previously, presumably off-camera, about Palovak's wish for the tape to remain private and unheard. Yet while the camera is rolling, Herzog is still compelled to listen to the tape and to advise Palovak afterwards of the importance of *not* listening to it. Any personal preference of Herzog's that Jewell Palovak spare herself from the despair of hearing her friend's death may be moot, given her pre-existing disposition to not listen to the tape. Instead, Herzog's lines might teach us something about his charge to make sure that, no matter what happens, his individual prescription of the truth prevails and is accepted among everyone involved as a universal human understanding.

As he sees *Grizzly Man* the centerpiece of his catalogue of work on men and wild nature, Herzog considers this scene to be one of his most accomplished. "I love this moment," he says, "it is very silent, very laconic, and one of the finest moments I ever shot in my life."[17] Beyond its basic cinematic quality though, its effectiveness in the pursuit of ecstatic truth defines its importance to fully appreciating Herzog's film and his work in general.

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[16] *Grizzly Man*.
[17] Herzog, *Fresh Air*.

V. From Timothy Treadwell to the figures of Caspar David Friedrich

At the end of his narration to *Grizzly Man*, Herzog concludes:

> Treadwell is gone. The argument how wrong or how right he was disappears into a distance, into a fog. What remains is his footage. And while we watch the animals in their joys of being, in their grace and ferociousness, a thought becomes more and more clear: that it is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature. And that for me, beyond his mission, gives meaning to his life and to his death.[18]

More than any of Treadwell's many accomplishments and failures as an environmental activist, it was his behavior as an ambitious-but-doomed man that spoke to Herzog from the place he sees as common and comprehensible to all human beings—the place of our "ecstatic truth."

Wild nature was the venue in which Timothy Treadwell could experience the inner human ecstasies shared among us all. Similarly, Werner Herzog's occupation of documenting such experiences places him over and over again in projects that observe men in that venue. For Herzog then, nature is the appropriate foil for humanity—the one that induces the same recognizable behavior from it and extracts its otherwise repressed or camouflaged ecstatic truths.

Grizzly Man is the appropriate centerpiece for Herzog's work then, even though the films that surround it employ different styles and varying degrees of artistic license. *Grizzly Man* is chronologically flanked by the drama *The Wild Blue Yonder*, just as was

[18] *Grizzly Man*.

La Soufrière by the folk tale *Heart of Glass*. The actuality of Herzog's documentary work is helpful to its dictation of "truths," but as we have discussed, these films are as pointedly manipulated towards expressing Herzog's peculiar truths as any original works of artistic vision. The truths expressed in *Grizzly Man* are supposed to be universal, but are as personal to Herzog as those which we can identify in the dramatized account of history in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997) and the fully fictionalized version of the present in *Lessons of Darkness*.

Caspar David Friedrich was an artist who worked from his original visions to express something of common human values as well. What connects him in particular to Herzog though is the importance which he assigned to wild nature as the logical background for human figures in that pursuit. Just as Herzog had Treadwell placed at the edge of civilization, that is, Friedrich had his painted male figures. His men also moved into fog and left behind them less to say of the meaning of their activity than of the binding truths of human beings altogether. Finally, those truths—loneliness, transience, death, etc.—are the same that we discover with Herzog's assistance in Timothy Treadwell.

VI. Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Mists*

The Wanderer above a Sea of Mists (1818) is perhaps Friedrich's best known paintings [see Fig. 1]. The figure of the wandering man, staff in hand and foot raised in its last possible forward step, appears to be both triumphant and defeated. He stands atop the rocks and looks downward towards mountains and clouds, but he is also arrested by them, as he can neither continue further on the journey nor can he see the land which has

been traveled or is left to be. In this sense, the painting could be read as a respectful commentary on the pathetic nature of men's attempts to reign in the natural world, continually halted by its vastness.

Such physical and emotional separation between the two elements had a very real origin for Friedrich. In saving him from dying himself in an ice-skating accident, Caspar's brother died at a young age under the cold water of a Griefswald lake. The emotional effects of this experience can be seen in the apparent motivations of *yearning* and *transience* surrounding figures like those of the wanderer,[19] who travel to the edge of dangerous cliffs and marvel at the mysterious landscapes below—but greater than—them. The *Wanderer above a Sea of Mists* contributes this attitude and more to Friedrich's catalogue of paintings which explicitly examine the relationship between human beings and nature, the *Rückenfigur* collection.

VII. Friedrich and the *Rückenfigur*

The figure with its back turned to the viewer (the "Rückenfigur"), which Friedrich inserted into otherwise landscape-oriented paintings, had a tendency to change the meaning of its surrounding nature-scene to comment on the ongoing communication between human beings and the natural world. Between approximately 1810 and 1825, Friedrich examined the capabilities of such figures extensively and across various unusual circumstances. One of the threads that bind these paintings together though, is the subsequent definition of roles to be played by men and women respectively amongst landscape. Simply, the men communicate an existence of longing and melancholy in

[19] Vaughan, William. *German Romantic Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1980, 65-66.

their attempts to decipher the secrets of the natural world, while the women do a quiet reverence of those to which they are exposed.

The *Wanderer* for instance, while never explicitly labeled so by the painter, was widely interpreted as a painting of the fallen Saxon infantryman Colonel Friedrich Gotthard von Brincken, a Jäger called to duty by Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia to fight the advances of Napoleon.[20] In this way, the painting reads as a triumphant and patriotic memorial. There is nonetheless a feeling of anxiety conveyed in the figure's precarious position at the edge of the cliff, his reward still being hidden under fog, and the remainder of his journey concealed. At the moment of his death then, von Brincken's hike through the rocks reaches a pinnacle, but one at which the vastness of the landscape he traverses only expands further and becomes less understood. The message appears to be something like: 'Search into nature for the end of life and of the Earth, and become only further mystified.'

The importance of separation between searching and capturing to Friedrich may have influenced Georg Friedrich Kersting, as he painted his peer's portrait in 1812. *Caspar David Friedrich in His Studio* represents the artist in his element [see Fig. 2]. Kersting, who studied under the same teachers as did Caspar David Friedrich at the Copenhagen Academy and was his companion during his 1810 excursions into the Riesengebirge (it is widely inferred that Kersting is the figure beside Friedrich in the paintings that came out of the studies and sketches made there), knew the artist very

[20] Koerner, Joseph Leo. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1990, 179.

well.[21] It would be safe for us to assume that his portrait is less a cursory glance at the artist at work than it is an earnest study of Friedrich's techniques and goals.

Friedrich is showed alone with his instruments, contemplating a canvas. His studio is conspicuously bare, save the palettes, triangle and straight-edge that adorn one of the walls. The latches that cover some portion of the window behind the painter are closed. Friedrich and his canvas are positioned in such a way that not only can the room not distract the artist from his inner-vision, but neither can the natural world itself. Kersting positions the canvas and the window as closely as parallel to each other as he could, while keeping the general composition of the piece relatively open and readable. As a result, the two surfaces nearly face each other and there is no way that the figure of Caspar David Friedrich can see both at the same time.

The painting reads as a clever communication by Kersting of Friedrich's process combined with the character of his typical male figures. The studio may very well have been empty, but the decision to compose the painting in this particular orientation underlines the degree to which Kersting sees Friedrich as neglecting what the outside world would dictate him to paint in favor of what his own senses do. In doing so, Friedrich attempts to communicate his vision of the natural world on the canvas, but must turn away from the neatly defined version of the actual landscape in favor of the one which is less complete, still seeking proper expression. Moreover, the entire process of his work is captured by Kersting in a moment of emptiness. The full end of the figure's work will never be known to him or to us.

[21] Schmied, Wieland. *Caspar David Friedrich* tr. Russel Stockman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc) 1995, 52.

Caspar David Friedrich in His Studio was painted too early to be a depiction of Friedrich working on the *Wanderer*, but it effectively compares the painter himself to men like Colonel von Brincken, whose attempts at fully understanding the reach of the world around them created more incomplete pictures.

In 1822, Friedrich painted his *Woman at the Window*, a portrait of his wife Caroline in his studio [see Fig. 3]. Despite many similar compositional elements, the painting does not actually depict the same studio in which Kersting set his portrait. Having been recently married and his first daughter having been born to him, the need for more space forced Friedrich to move a few houses down his street and into the building seen here. Truly committed to his technique though, one could easily mistake the rooms for the same, as the studio in this new home appears strategically like the old one, right down to the window-shutters that Friedrich brought with him.

The painting experienced mixed reception upon its initial exhibition. The *Wiener Zeitschrift für Kunst* (Vienna Newspaper for Art) for instance, went so far as to admonish Friedrich's entire *Rückenfigur* approach. In their description, the painting offers "a view of the Elbe and the poplars on the opposite bank in the center of the background, [which] would be very true and charming if Friedrich had not once again followed his whim, namely his love of painting people from the back."[22]

Aesthetic issues aside, the *Wiener* misses the broader implications of the painting, ironically trying to make it fit as a landscape representation of the Elbe. The attitude is ironic because Friedrich's painting has evoked a primal yearning inside of the observer to comprehend the partially-obstructed nature-scene. The woman's leaning posture takes on a special role in this respect as the lines of her dress all lead our eye, along with the

[22] Schmied 100.

geometrically-accomplished linear perspective of the piece, out through the window. A wall and the same old window latches separate Friedrich, his critics and the rest of us onlookers from seeing the entire outdoor scene, but his female figure is uninhibited. She went so far as to open the latches of the window herself to tranquilly experience all the glory of nature in broad daylight.

That enriching, while effortless, experience was not enjoyed by Friedrich in his process, nor the hapless Colonel above the fog. As was the case in those scenes, the painter and observer alike are inhibited by a physical boundary. The wrinkle which *Woman at a Window* adds is the presence of someone to whom the scenery is fully revealed. This is a defining quality among women among Friedrich's Rückenfiguren. In juxtaposition with the male subjects, it reminds us of the uniqueness of the experience of Friedrich's men.

In the same year that he completed *The Wanderer above a Sea of Mists*, Caspar David Friedrich painted *Woman before the Rising Sun* (also known as *Dawn*) [see Fig. 4]. In the scene, a woman stands in the role of the Rückenfigur, arms slightly raised at her sides, admiring the peaking of the sun over what are indeterminately clouds or a distant mountain. Again, the figure is the axis of the composition, around which the formulated symmetry of the natural formations and lines of perspective are oriented. A great, vast landscape stretches out in front of this woman, including the same kind of shallow mountains we see in *The Wanderer*. This is where the similarities end, though.

Woman before the Rising Sun and *The Wanderer above a Sea of Mists* are paintings concerned with similar subject matter. Yet again, the former is, through its role as a foil, indicative of the character of Friedrich's male heroes. The path upon which the

female figure walks is diverted a few steps in front of her and beyond it lays the extensive landscape. Instead of the impenetrable terrain of *The Wanderer* though, this landscape lies flat and open. Moreover, while the unique lighting provided by the half-risen sun does make the landscape somewhat mysterious, nothing is being hidden from the figure-spectator. As the sun rises, the view will only be made more readable to her. As the sun reaches out with its rays to the figure, it appears almost to be beckoning her to venture further and discover. In response, her gesture suggests reception. Unlike Col. von Brincken, this woman does not have the secrets of the natural world necessarily shrouded from her. The laid path does end right in front of her, but one viewing this painting cannot help but feel like the natural world is engaging the woman actively and she is receiving it still and contentedly, not journeying into it only to be rebuffed.

VIII. Men at the Precipice: Friedrich's *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*

A comprehensive summation of the character roles can be gleaned from Friedrich's *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818-1819) [see Fig. 5]. Two men and one woman are represented with backs turned in this painting. One man stands with his gaze directed towards the horizon while the other crawls on the ground, searching in the grass it would seem, for something lost or difficult to find from a distance. Before all three figures is the same massive space of the seascape, which unlike most Friedrich vistas, appears quite flat and thereby flush with–nearly overflowing into—the foreground.

Between the two separate representations of men at the edge, Friedrich imagines the distant-searching wanderer and Kersting's determined detailer. The men share a common occupation in the painting however, and either or both could represent Friedrich

himself, the cliffs having been a favorite vacation spot of his family's.[23] The crawling gentleman, while at the edge of a seemingly high cliff, stares directly into the ground. On the precipice, he aims his attention to a flat surface which is certainly impenetrable, but contains upon its face a lost property of his which he wishes to regain. Meanwhile, the upright man is captivated by what at first appears to be a more distant view. However, his function in the painting is not that different than his partner's. He leans against the flat support of a tree at the very edge of the cliff as he stares directly into an area of the canvas that is remarkably empty. The solidness of this large portion of the canvas underlines its role as an impenetrable area.[24] So like the figure on his knees, this man has positioned himself as close as possible to a flat plane into which he can piercingly stare.

While this plane attracts the whole attention of the upright man, the woman is less concerned by closeness to a physical and perceptible halt. The gesture of the female figure (possibly a representation of Caroline Friedrich) suggests that she is helping the latter of the two men in his searching. If so, the message remains consistent as one of the privileged viewpoint of the female seer. In either case, she is at least painted in a position expressive of more repose than are the men.

Chalk Cliffs on Rügen may at first appear to disregard the subject of death in the context of the natural horizon, but it actually takes a more subtle approach to it. If we accept the reading of each of the two male figures in the painting as representing Friedrich (or really any person in two distinct figurative instances), we confront issues of temporality. The same man is shown in two stages of life, and in the latter of two, he has positioned himself closer not necessarily to the edge, but to a flat boundary of a plane.

[23] Schmied 81.
[24] Schmied 82.

Accordingly, the woman who accompanies the men serves in this reading as the reference point for a figure particular to its space and time. She does not age and remains endlessly at the same place in relation to the mystery and/or death that we have interpreted these planes as representing.

IX: Spiritual Explanations of Friedrich's compositions

While it does not completely explain his gender-specific motivations, it is necessary to understand Friedrich's landscapes in their place as spiritual works. The *Rückenfigur* collection is part of Friedrich's personal contribution to the wider German Romanticist tradition of nature-worship through artistic media. His study of humans in nature is not based merely upon aesthetics, but also his version of the transcendentalist Protestantism which was integral to the movement. If the natural world encases as much spiritual relevance as the philosophers, writers and artists of the movement agreed, Friedrich has asserted on some level that the separation of men and nature, and the persistent yearning to bridge it, has an unambiguously Christian origin.

The persistent curiosity among German Romanticist painters concerning the obscurities of their natural environment exists under a generally theological context. Friedrich's movement was an artistic mode concerned first and foremost with the inseparability of the natural world with the mind and with protestant spirituality. In his *Nine Letters on Landscape*, an artistic peer of Friedrich's and fellow admirer of Goethe, Carl Gustav Carus eloquently describes the religious experience:

> Stand them upon the summit of the mountain, and gaze over the long rows of hills. Observe the passage of streams and all the magnificence that opens up

> before your eyes; and what feeling grips you? It is a silent devotion within you. You lose yourself in boundless spaces, your whole being experiences a cleansing and clarification, your I vanishes, you are nothing, God is everything.[25]

The crucifix, church and other conventional Christian images appearing occasionally among the Rückenfigur and often in his other landscape paintings, the inseparability of nature and spirituality is noticeably important to Friedrich's work in particular.

The Transcendentalism of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schelling was popular among Romanticists as well, though. The thoughts of the latter on painting speak to a distinctly Romantic ethic of depicting the natural world, specifically that one's awareness of one's self and the world in which they live is paramount to bringing "unconscious life in nature to conscious expression".[26] In other words, in order translate something as intangible as nature outwardly in an artistic language, one must first resolve inside their place in that nature and more general personal relationship to the natural world.

"Close your physical eye," Friedrich understands it, "so that you first see your picture with your spiritual eye. Then bring to light what you have seen in the dark so that it is passed on to others from outside to the inside."[27] Friedrich's compositions for landscapes, with and without his signature Rückenfiguren, were painted in his studio, completely shut away from the scenery itself, so that the painter could compose or re-compose the images in his mind and set them onto the canvas, creatively free of the oppression of the actual scene sitting in front of him.

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[25] Koerner 194.
[26] Vaughan 66.
[27] Traeger, Jörg (ed.) *Caspar David Friedrich* (New York: Rizzoli) 1976, 30.

X. Spirituality in *Grizzly Man*

The opinion that an original (almost Platonic) image can be pursued within the artist links Caspar David Friedrich to Werner Herzog, who even in the case of his documentary work acknowledges the creative force which comes from within himself. However, Herzog has never appeared to be interested in issues of God or Christianity through his films. The conclusion that something as simple as "God" could be the active ecstatic agent within the artist and among the products of an artistic movement would probably be too intellectually unfulfilling to Herzog to ever satisfy his curiosity.

Still, there is a consistent if indirect appreciation of the religious implications of Timothy Treadwell's experiences throughout *Grizzly Man*. At the very least, both Herzog and Treadwell acknowledge the attitude that wild nature has godliness to it. Though candidly agnostic, Treadwell is not above calling on God to help the bears, nor does he hesitate to thank God when he feels that this prayer has been answered. "I have no idea if there's a God," he explains it to the camera, "but if there's a God, God would be very, very pleased with me."[28] This conviction is essential to him. He only makes a few explicit references to God, but like the Romanticists that came before him, Timothy Treadwell took for granted that if a whole, true, innocent power exists, it is inseparable from nature. Herzog documents this attitude in *Grizzly Man* alongside the other elements of Treadwell's character which center the story.

Conclusion

The strongest artistic link between Caspar David Friedrich and Werner Herzog is their common dependence upon wild nature to inspire men's pursuit of innocence and to

[28] *Grizzly Man.*

reveal their inner natures. Herzog may ultimately find chaos where Friedrich had envisioned Christ, but to each, the object is to face man with the end of his corporal worth, his "irrevocable fate,"[29] and induce his raw human reactions. They each employ the mortal power of nature as a form of "justice," in Herzog's own vocabulary, a method through which all of our "deepest essentials" are revealed.[30]

Werner Herzog employed similar aesthetic tropes in *Heart of Glass* as did Caspar David Friedrich in *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* to what he would argue were different ends, but *Grizzly Man* displays how the director's emulation of the painter's methods transcends aesthetics and pursues what is indeed a shared goal. Herzog may not agree with Friedrich that the fellowship of Christianity is one of humanity's essentials, but what is more important is that each artist has staked his finest work on reproducing the environments in which those essentials, whatever they may be, can materialize. If it is true that these two artists can reproduce *ecstatic truths* in so doing, their own interpretations are only as relevant as each of ours as human participants. In spite of their personal disagreements, we can read the art of Herzog and that of Friedrich as producing the same declarations of natural truth among human beings.

[29] Bachmann 5.
[30] *In the Edges: The 'Grizzly Man' Session*. Dir. Erik Nelson. Lions Gate Films Inc., 2005.

Appendix

A.

Minnesota declaration: truth and fact in documentary cinema
"LESSONS OF DARKNESS"

1. By dint of declaration the so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of verité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.

2. One well-known representative of Cinema Verité declared publicly that truth can be easily found by taking a camera and trying to be honest. He resembles the night watchman at the Supreme Court who resents the amount of written law and legal procedures. "For me," he says, "there should be only one single law: the bad guys should go to jail."
Unfortunately, he is part right, for most of the many, much of the time.

3. Cinema Verité confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones. And yet, facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.

4. Fact creates norms, and truth illumination.

5. There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.

6. Filmmakers of Cinema Verité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts.

7. Tourism is sin, and travel on foot virtue.

8. Each year at springtime scores of people on snowmobiles crash through the melting ice on the lakes of Minnesota and drown. Pressure is mounting on the new governor to pass a protective law. He, the former wrestler and bodyguard, has the only sage answer to this: "You can´t legislate stupidity."

9. The gauntlet is hereby thrown down.

10. The moon is dull. Mother Nature doesn´t call, doesn´t speak to you, although a glacier eventually farts. And don´t you listen to the Song of Life.

11. We ought to be grateful that the Universe out there knows no smile.

12. Life in the oceans must be sheer hell. A vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger. So much of a hell that during evolution some species - including man - crawled, fled onto some small continents of solid land, where the Lessons of Darkness continue.

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota April 30, 1999
Werner Herzog

Fig. 1. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*. 1817-1818; Oil on canvas. Niedersachsisches Landesmuseum, Hanover.

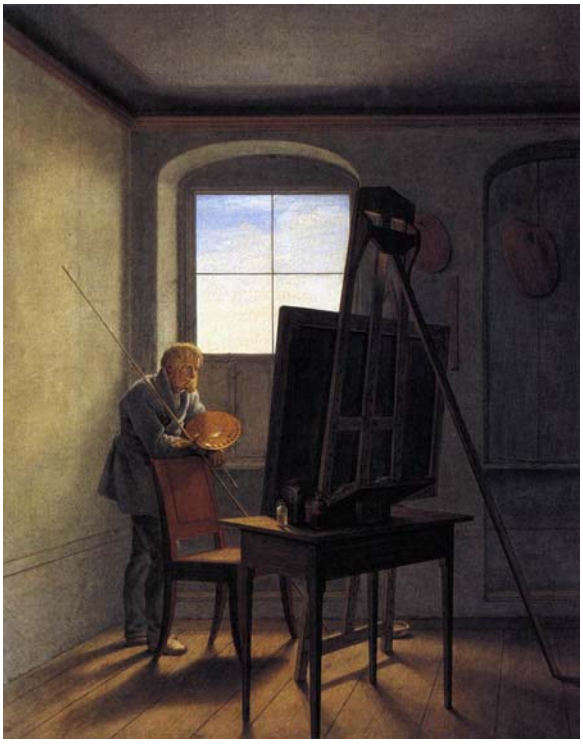

Fig. 2. Kersting, Georg Friedrich. *Caspar David Friedrich in his Studio*. 1812; Oil on canvas. Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

Fig. 3. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Woman at a Window*. 1822; Oil on canvas. Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Fig. 4. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Woman Before the Rising Sun*. 1818-1820; Oil on canvas. Museum Folkwang, Essen.

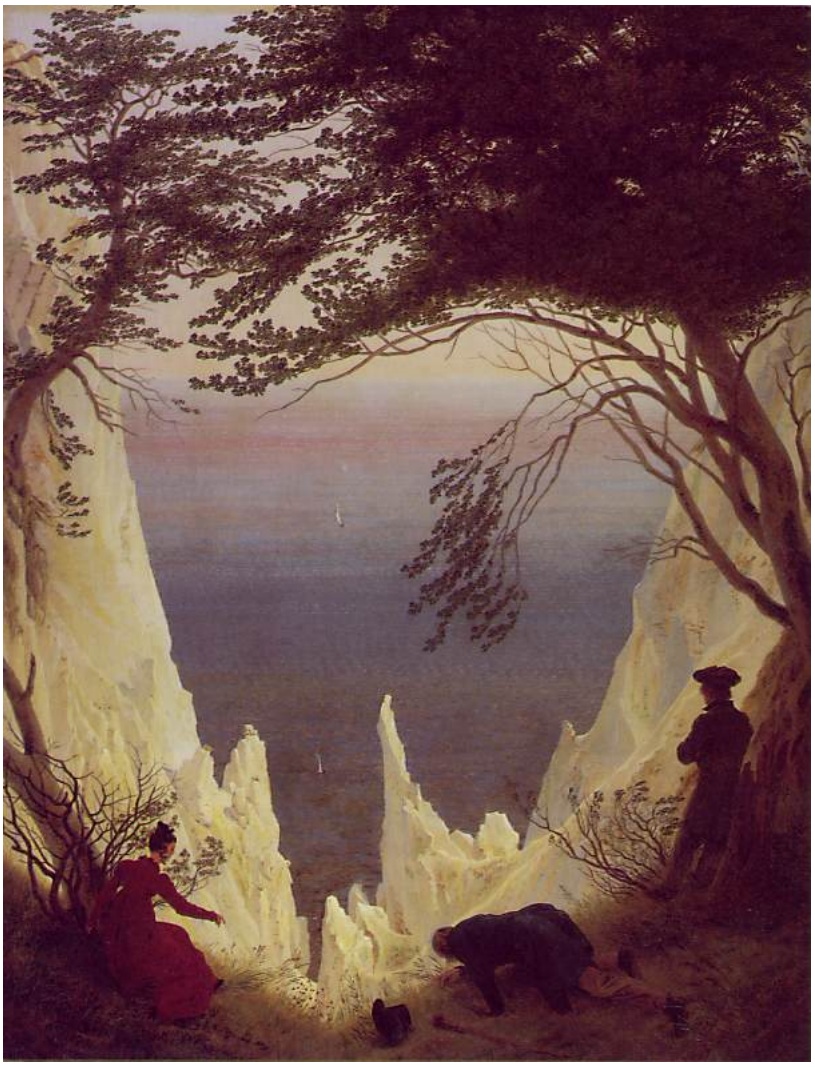

Fig. 5. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*. 1818-1819; Oil on canvas. Stiftung Oskar Reinhart Collection.

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